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ABSTRACT

Parent-run, day care programs existing in public elementary schools in Brookline, Massachusetts are described in this paper. This program model is put forward as an example of a successful negotiating process between parents and school officials that is an alternative to public school prime sponsorship of day care. Three critical elements as steps that must be taken in order to start day care programs in community facilities which may not be predisposed to house such services are discussed. These elements are documentation, persuasion, and collaboration. (Author/SS)

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Starting Programs: Critical Elements and Stumbling Blocks.
The Experience of a Parent-Run Program in the Public Schools

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In Brookline, Massachusetts, the need for day care for school-age children has been met by the collaborative efforts of parent groups and public school officials. Over a seven year period, from 1972 to the present, a relationship has been established between these two groups, which traditionally have had difficulty in working together. This relationship has allowed parent groups in elementary schools to develop after-school programs in public school space provided and maintained by the school system, which was willing to forego administrative and programmatic control over the programs. Parent-run day care programs (called "Extended Day") now exist in all eight Brookline elementary schools. A new town-wide program was established in 1978 to serve children from third to sixth grade who required a more varied and flexible setting. Approximately 500 children are enrolled in all programs.

The Brookline model is useful to study for two reasons. First, the organizing and negotiating process which brought parents and school officials together under the aegis of the elected school committee can be considered as an example of a successful political and educative process for both groups. Second, the Brookline programs can be seen as an interesting alternative to proposed public school prime sponsorship of day care, a role which continues to be

controversial.[1]

While this description may be somewhat idiosyncratic due to the unusual nature of the community of Brookline, with its high degree of community participation in decision-making, in recent months a number of similar efforts have begun in cities and towns across the country. Recognition of elements common to the organizing processes in starting day care programs may be useful in establishing partnerships other than the parent/public school model outlined here.

Day care for school-age children is not yet widely available in Massachusetts. Pre-school day care, although insufficient to meet current demand, is in relatively greater supply than programs for the school-age child. While ample documentation exists on the risks faced by young children who do not have adequate supervision after school, conventional wisdom has it that once a child is of school age, he or she can manage to function alone. With rapid changes in the working patterns of women with children, increasing numbers of school-age children become "latch-key" kids, faced with the questionable choice of watching television all day or of making it on "the street" until their parents come home from work.[2] Also, income eligibility guidelines restrict families whose incomes are slightly over Title XX figures from participation in the few centers under contract with the Department of Public Welfare. Some private centers provide after-school services, but transportation and overhead costs are reflected in high tuition rates, further prohibiting many families from enrolling children.

The awareness of limited facilities for school-age children, coupled with a concrete need for service, motivated a parent group in a Brookline school to design an after-school program accessible

to their children. Originally convened by the school principal, this first group of working parents (mostly mothers) requested and won School Committee approval to incorporate as a non-profit organization. The group negotiated for Department of Public Welfare (Title XX) funds for a small number of children, and planned their program's expenses based on tuitions averaging $25/week per child. (The Department of Public Welfare currently funds approximately 30 children in four of the programs.)

The School Committee gave its formal approval for use of school space based on the precedent for "private" use of public school buildings set by a local music school, which had operated for several years in the elementary schools. Also, the Committee supported the concept of community use of the public schools. Concurrent with the early organizational period of the after-school programs, a new elementary school was planned and built and several others were slated for renovation. Although most School Committee members supported the rationale for the after-school programs, official sanction was at that time primarily a pragmatic act, built on the idea that the more new or renovated buildings are used, the easier it is to sell a building program to the public. The actual dollar commitment of the school system was small; all costs except for one hour of custodial time were funded by parent tuition and welfare vendor payments. Further, school enrollments across the country were beginning to decline. Consequently, as each new after-school program was formed in subsequent years, the School Committee and staff recognized the advantage of a social service program which served to attract new families to a community dominated by a growing number of elderly residents.

Attitudes toward the programs varied among some of the school personnel. Some concern surfaced that the schools should not be institutions designed to "replace" the family, that children in day care had problems, that their family situations were atypical. A small group of kindergarten teachers saw children who attended day care as being inattentive, tired, and causing behavior problems in the other, "non-day-care" children at school. Although negative attitudes such as these were not widespread, the underlying hostility had both emotional and practical effects on the programs. Parents felt uncomfortable with the children's regular classroom teachers because of a fear of a subtle "tracking" of their children; after-school program staff felt at times isolated and excluded from the school as a whole. Requests by program staff for use of specialized areas in the school buildings (shop, homemaking, art, etc.) were often denied or so controlled by regulations and boundaries that sharing of areas and equipment was all but impossible. As more parent groups formed to explore child care needs with the intent to replicate the early efforts, other problems began to hinder the growth of additional programs. Since no state licensing standards existed for after-school programs, the local Health Department, a delegated licensing body, undertook to "license" the programs. Along with certain stipulated rules such as the number of square feet per child, additional building and zoning code regulations were applied.

In the early years other problems arose. One program expanded into a part of the school building considered to be in a "residential" zone of the town, after spending the previous year in the front half of the school, in a "commercial" zone. After the move, the

program staff were informed by officials that the parent group must apply for a special zoning permit, requiring blueprints and a $500.00 fee. It was at this point that the School Committee officially placed the programs under the umbrella of the school system. This exempted the programs from licensing requirements which were clearly impossible to meet, and also demonstrated a continuing commitment to the programs by the School Committee. Once this support was made concrete, others, such as teachers, principals, and school department administrators, acknowledged the program as a fait accompli.

Throughout the events described above, several critical elements were evident: documentation, persuasion, and collaboration. These important steps must be taken in order to start programs in community facilities which may not be predisposed to house such services.

Documentation. Evidence of the need for school-age child care can be gathered from parents through school-by-school surveys, to provide a strong indication of potential participation in a program. Using data from the surveys, the organizing group can develop proposals for School Committee approval. The proposals outline the goals and scope of the proposed programs and provide concrete information to those charged with making decisions about the use of school space; they are especially useful if they anticipate a number of serious questions of concern to Committee members (school liability for children and staff; insurance, health and safety provisions; budget plans; staffing patterns, etc.). Presentation of the proposals to the School Committee may involve audio-visual aids, enrollment charts, or other supporting material.

Persuasion. In communities where programs are starting up, parents typically have to persuade school boards and administrators of the value of school-age day care based in the public schools. The value of day care to the community, beyond the simple provision of child care to children of working parents, can be emphasized. In this regard, support from community groups and political leaders may be an important influence on elected school board members. Should school enrollments be declining, community leaders may be very interested in developing new ways to use school space and to attract young families to the community. Day care is one such incentive.

The availability of financial support from outside sources is also a persuasive tool. For example, a Community Development grant (HUD) for start-up costs, a CETA contract for staff, and Title XX funds for eligible families can buttress the base of a self-supported program.

Space may be the only contribution that public schools are willing to make to school-age child care programs, but negotiation for additional in-kind contributions should be considered by the petitioning group. Such contributions might include custodial services (collective bargaining agreements may already stipulate late afternoon hours), utilities, extended use of school transportation, and the opportunity to purchase equipment and supplies in bulk along with school system orders. The Brookline system provides space, utilities, and some custodial service.

Collaboration. Any partnership requires a high degree of collaboration between the partners. In the Brookline experience, two School Committee members (both women, one a working mother of

school-age children) worked with parents to clarify the role of each partner. Guidelines or regulations governing the use of school space and spelling out areas of responsibility, were written collaboratively by school staff and parents. It should also be noted at this point that the school principal's role is crucial in introducing the program to regular school faculty and staff. The principal's early support sets the tone for cooperation by other faculty and staff members who may not be so enthusiastic about sharing "their" school.

Parent-administered programs such as the Brookline model tend to solve at least one of the dilemmas currently faced by so many school systems. Increasingly, the schools are asked to take on a social service role for families and children, a role which many systems are unwilling or unable to assume. Public school support of programs such as Brookline's allows the system to offer services without a large commitment of finances or staff. In turn, programs designed by the parents who use them keep costs relatively low, provide stable services, and involve parents in providing good quality care for their children.

Footnotes

1. See Day Care and the Public Schools. Levine, James, Education Development Center, Inc., 55 Chapel Street, Newton, Massachusetts, 02160. 1978.
2. Bergstrom, Joan; Dreher, Donna. "Day Care for the School-Age Child," from The Evaluation of Existing Federal Interagency Day Care Requirements. (ED 156 349, 139 pp.).